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# An unrecognised Buddhist expression in Kalhaṇa's *Rājatarāṅgiṇī*

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## Abstract:

The brief note draws attention to an occurrence of the Buddhist word *mahāśākya* in manuscripts of Kalhaṇa's *Rājatarāṅgiṇī* that has gone unrecognized so far and therefore was dismissed in modern editions in favour of a spurious reading.

## Keywords:

Buddhist lexicography, *mahāśākya*, *mahesakkha*, *\*mahāśākya*, Central Asia, Kalhaṇa, *Rājatarāṅgiṇī*

In the first chapter of his *Rājatarāṅgiṇī* Kalhaṇa recounts a story of a witch (*kṛtyakā*) who, disguised as a beggar, approaches a certain king on the road (1.131 foll.). After having revealed her true shape she tells the king that she has been sent by angry Buddhists to kill him as revenge for the destruction of their monastery. However, she continues, Bodhisattvas have called her and gave instructions not to kill him, but instead to urge him to build a new monastery. Her account of the Bodhisattva's instructions starts thus: *mahāśākyaḥ sa nṛpatir na śakyo bādhitum tvayā*<sup>1</sup> (1.141) which is translated by M.A. Stein as 'That king is a great Śākya (Mahāśākya). You cannot hurt him.'<sup>2</sup> In a note to his translation Stein explains: 'I prefer the reading *mahāśākyaḥ*, as corr. from A<sub>1</sub> °*śakyaḥ* (also L) by a later hand, to A<sub>3</sub> *mahāsattvaḥ* because of the Yamaka formed with the following *śakyo*.'<sup>3</sup> He refers to the PW where already O. Böhtlingk had suggested to read *mahāśākyaḥ* instead of *mahāśakyaḥ* in the edition of A. Troyer (Paris 1840) used by him.

Obviously, the word play with *śakyo* would be even more striking if one would read *mahāśākyaḥ*. However, this word was unknown to Böhtlingk und Stein, and from the viewpoint of classical Sanskrit not easy to understand. Thanks to the progress that Buddhist lexicography has made since then we can now say for sure that *mahāśākyaḥ* is the original reading indeed. This expression is transmitted in Buddhist Sanskrit texts as a Sanskritisation of a Middle-Indic word that appears in Pali as *mahesakkha*. The complexities of the different shapes of the word in Buddhist Sanskrit texts and the etymology of the Pali have been discussed by O. von Hinüber 2002 (p. 161ff.). Suffice it to say here that the most probable origin of the Middle-Indic word from *\*mahā-yaśas-ka* was forgotten early on, while its original meaning 'very renowned or esteemed' was still remembered in Pali texts, but

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1. Stein 1892. The edition Bandhu 1963–65 has the same text and offers the same variants discussed below.

2. Stein 1900.

3. Ibid. ad loc.

changed in Buddhist Sanskrit texts due to the wrong Sanskritisation to ‘very powerful.’ Among the various shapes of the Buddhist Sanskrit word, the variant *mahāśakya* is known especially from Central Asian manuscripts. This is geographically in perfect line with its occurrence in a Kashmiri text. Last but not least, the reading *mahāśakyaḥ* is preferable from the point of view of textual criticism. As B. Kölver 1971 (pp. 55–61) has shown, there are basically three independent lines of the textual transmission of the *Rājatarāṅgiṇī* in the relevant section, viz. manuscript A or A<sub>1</sub>, readings of a corrector called A<sub>3</sub> by Stein, and manuscript L that was discovered after the publication of Stein’s edition, but consulted for his translation. Among these main stems, A<sub>1</sub> and L agree in reading *mahāśakyaḥ* against A<sub>3</sub> *mahāsattvaḥ*, an obviously explanatory reading that originally might have been a gloss or an attempt to make sense of a supposedly abstruse text, while *mahāśākyaḥ* is only a correction ‘by a later hand.’ For all these reasons the reading *mahāśakyaḥ* can be taken as authentic beyond any doubt and may be registered as the only occurrence of this Buddhist expression known so far outside the Buddhist Sanskrit literature.

We can, therefore, translate the line correctly as ‘This king is very powerful. You cannot hurt him,’ and we may wonder how the king, a worshipper of Śiva who was not familiar enough with Buddhist parlance to know what a ‘bodhisattva’ is,<sup>4</sup> could understand the even more unusual expression *mahāśakya*.<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> *bauddhabhāṣām ajānāno māheśvaratayā nṛpaḥ / ko bodhisattvo yaṃ bhadre māṃ vetsīti jagāda tām* (1.135). ‘The king, who being a worshipper of Śiva did not understand the Bauddha’s ways of expression, asked her: “O fair one, who is the Bodhisattva for whom you know me?”’ (Stein) The witch had praised him to be a Bodhisattva.

<sup>5</sup> I am grateful to Walter Slaje (Weimar) for giving valuable advice on the transmission of the *Rājatarāṅgiṇī*.